



## Using explanatory case study design to promote rigorous, systematic investigation of community-university partnerships

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**Keywords:** Explanatory case studies, democratic engagement, partnerships, explanation testing, reciprocal determinism

**Conference track:** Contexts and methods: Theoretical and conceptual frameworks, research designs, and methodological issues

**Format:** Research/Scholarly paper

### Summary

This paper addresses case study critique and promotes rigor by presenting explanatory case study method (ECS). ECS investigates phenomena through proposition building and explanation testing. Positive and negative evidence iteratively refine an explanatory proposition over multiple contexts.

Rubin (2000) noted that community engagement research concerned with partnerships utilized descriptive case study methods. Descriptive cases continue to be published but are often noted to be of

limited use. Depicted as context specific and lacking methodological sophistication, they are portrayed as a weak means to investigate the scholarship and practice of service-learning and community engagement. This paper provides a rigorous and systematic alternative to the descriptive case study while retaining the significance of context and multiplicity of variables.

Case studies, generally, are not euphemistic for an historic description of an educational program. Rather, they are meant to be a method of research appropriate when the goal is to create broad rather than narrow definition(s) of phenomenon, to examine phenomenon in context rather than separately, and to use multiple rather than singular sources of evidence (Yin, 1994). ECS capitalizes on these conditions and relies on carefully crafted explanatory propositions (Yin, 1994) to generate a theory of how factors affect a phenomenon.

This paper illustrates the first iteration of applying ECS to democratically-engaged partnerships. ECS was used as a means to investigate the relationship between the acquisition of a democratic orientation and external partnership conditions, partnership learning interactions, and stakeholder competencies and attributes. The paper provides an example of the development of an ECS, including the explanatory proposition, how it is informed by extant theory (in this case, reciprocal determinism), the selection of research questions appropriate to the proposition, the mechanisms by which the proposition is tested and refined, and how preparations are made for the next iteration. Rather than resign ourselves to post-hoc descriptions and conjecture about the reasons these phenomena occurred, (ECS) allows us to honor the context and specificity of situational influence in a systematic and rigorous way.

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